

REVIEW: *DOG, MASTER, AND RELATIVES*

Reviewed by Caihua Dorji (Tshe dpal rdo rje ཚེ་དཔལ་རྡོ་རྗེ།
Caihuan Duo jie 才还多杰)



Stag 'bum rgyal ལྷག་པུམ་རྒྱལ།. 2009. *khyi dang bdag po/ da dung gnyen tshan dag* ཁྱི་དང་བདག་པོ་དང་དྲུང་གཉེན་མཚན་དག [Dog, Master, and Relatives]. Zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang མཚོ་སྒྲོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱུར་ཁང་། [Mtsho sngon Nationalities Press]. 229 pp. ISBN 978-7-5420-1419-1 (paperback 18RMB).

Stag 'bum rgyal (b. 1966) is from a herding family in Mang ra (Guinan) County, Mtsho lho (Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. A member of the China Writers' Association and the Standing Committee of Mtsho lho Writers' Association, Stag 'bum rgyal teaches the Tibetan language at Mang ra Nationalities Middle School. He graduated from Mtsho lho Nationalities Normal School in 1986 and began his teaching career in the same year. Later in 1988, he attended a training program at Northwest Nationalities University and earned a graduation certificate.

Stag 'bum rgyal has published more than sixty short stories, novellas, and novels since 1980s. Among his novellas, *Sgo khyi 'The Watch Dog'*, *Khyi rgan 'The Old Dog'*, *h+'a pa gsos pa'i zin bris 'The Story of Dog Adoption'*, *Mi tshe'i glu dbyangs 'The Song of Life'*, and *khyi dang bdag po/ da dung gnyen tshan dag 'Dog, Master, and Relatives'*² have been translated into Chinese and published in such magazines as *Xizang Wenxue 'Tibet Literature'*, *Minzu Wenxue 'Nationalities Literature'*, and *Qinghai Hu 'Qinghai Lake'*. *Rnam shes 'The Soul'*, *Rgud 'Degeneration'*, and *khyi dang bdag po/ da dung gnyen tshan dag 'Dog, Master, and Relatives'*, won the Sbrang char Literature Prize in 1999, 2003, and 2006, respectively.

Khyi dang bdag po/ da dung gnyen tshan dag was first published in *Sbrang char* in 2004 and later published again in a

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² Robin (2016) translates this title as *A Dog, Its Master and Their Relatives*.
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collection of his works entitled *Mi rabs gsum gyi rmi lam 'Dreams of Three Generations'*.¹

Told in the third person and using flashbacks, the story under review has two plots. The first surrounds a wife who had problems with her mother-in-law and cheats on her honest husband, which creates problems in the family. The second plot centers on events in the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

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The story begins in contemporary times with Dkon tho's beautiful wife having problems with her mother-in-law. Unable to solve this issue, Dkon tho's mother leaves the home. Observing this situation, community (the reader never learns the name of this community) elders hold a secret discussion to look for a solution. Before the results of the discussion are given to Dkon tho, an old village man scolds Dkon tho "*Dkon tho, khyod mi ma red, khyod khyi red* 'You aren't human, you're a dog.'"

Dkon tho carefully replies, "I was a red bitch in my previous life."

This holds powerful local resonance, reminding locals of a collection of incidents surrounding the death of a red bitch during the Cultural Revolution. Community elders hold more discussions and decide to persuade Dkon tho to ask his mother to return to his home. They appoint Blo rgyam (Dkon tho's mother's brother) to be in charge of this matter.

The death of the red bitch relates to a government cadre disappearing in the community during those troubled earlier, "revolutionary" times. An ensuing government investigation concluded that the missing cadre had been eaten by local dogs. The county Party secretary, Zhao, then summons all the county government cadres and appoints a Dog Killing Committee headed by Wang Dahai, which is soon dispatched to the community. When Wang and his group arrive, a meeting is convened and locals are told to kill all their dogs² to prevent a horrible disease that is transmitted by dogs

¹ Information about Stag 'bum rgyal is from <http://bit.ly/2lzqV6O> (accessed 31 December 2017), Stag 'bum rgyal (2015), and rdo sbis klu 'bum rgyal (2017).

² See the chapter entitled "Dog Massacre" (118-121) in Orgyan Nyima's

to humans. Dkon tho's father is then appointed as the second leader of the Dog Killing Committee.

Blo rgyam agonizes over the fate of their family's red bitch watchdog that came from the mountains several years earlier and never left Blo rgyam's family, loyally guarding the family's sheep from wolves and thieves. Blo rgyam consults Dkon tho's father on how to avoid killing the red bitch. That night, Blo rgyam takes the red bitch to A myes b+'a yan Mountain, the abode of a venerated local mountain deity, and orders her to never return to his home.

The committee begins killing the community dogs. Dkon tho's father obediently does whatever Wang orders, even killing his brother's ('Jigs med) daughter's pet dog, which results in her becoming mentally disturbed.

After the dogs are killed, locals worry about how to protect their sheep from wolves. Time passes and the wolves attack, killing many of the community's sheep. This is during the commune period so it provides locals with a good excuse to enjoy the meat from the killed sheep.

To everyone's surprise, none of Blo rgyam's family's sheep were killed by the wolves, and consequently, their family has no meat to enjoy. Blo rgyam's family then decides to slaughter a male sheep secretly at night and report that it was killed by wolves. When Blo rgyam goes to the sheepfold to execute this plan, he sees the red bitch lying near the sheepfold, protecting the sheep. Deeply moved, Blo rgyam gives the sheep's entrails to the dog after butchering the sheep.

The next morning, a fervent revolutionary (a young man whose name we are not told) sees a red bitch running with entrails in its mouth, and reports this to the Dog Killing Committee. Wang Dahai immediately calls a meeting and says the family who owns this red bitch must be identified. Dkon tho's father knows that the dog belongs to his sister's family, but lies that the dog was a stray that Blo rgyam

(2016) contemporary history of a Kham area for vivid accounts of dog killings, e.g.:

Red Guards and soldiers killed all the homeless dogs in the village. ... The dog killers next came to individual homes and shot family dogs. When some people tried to stop them, the dog killers explained that this was to help people (119).

cared for and that it began roaming again, which explains why it was not killed during the dog killing campaign.

Wang Dahai furiously orders Blo rgyam to stand in front of the local community members and punishes him by assigning him the task of herding the commune's horses. Wang next orders Dkon tho's father to organize the committee into groups and send them into the mountains to find and kill the red bitch. The groups set off but return and report that they were unable to find the dog.

The next day, Wang Dahai himself goes to the mountains to kill the dog with two government cadres, Dkon tho's father, and several revolutionary young villagers. After passing through several valleys, they eventually see the red bitch that, to their surprise, vanishes when they get near. When locals hear about the mysterious, disappearing red bitch, they worry about what may befall them.

Another surprise comes a few days later. 'Jigs med's family's sheep disappear from the sheepfold at night and then the next day, they reappear some distance from the sheepfold. Nearby is a dead wolf. Blo rgyam is further saddened when he realizes that the red bitch fought and killed the wolf to keep the family's sheep safe. Locals then spread the idea that the red bitch is A myes b+'a yan's watchdog.

Subsequent to the circulation of this rumor, the village experience more shocks, e.g., the young revolutionary who had reported seeing the red bitch carrying animal entrails in her mouth becomes mute. Infuriated when he hears the locals' explanation of retribution, Wang Dahai convenes a meeting and admonishes people for being superstitious and counter-revolutionary. He announces that the master of the red bitch, Blo rgyam, is now responsible for killing it within three days, otherwise he will be taken to the county town for interrogation on the grounds of being counter-revolutionary.

Blo rgyam is at a loss but then Dkon tho's father comes to his home. Afraid to kill A myes b+'a yan's watchdog, they decide to find and kill another red bitch. When they are about to set off for their search, they learn that the father of the young revolutionary who had reported the red bitch running with entrails in her mouth in the village had been attacked and killed by a pack of wolves.

Blo rgyam and Dkon tho's father go searching for another red bitch in other communities, but return home empty-handed.

The next morning, Blo rgyam and his wife see the red female dog covered in blood lying near their home. Blo rgyam is very sad when he realizes that the red female dog is dead. Dkon tho's father and Blo rgyam report to the Dog Killing Committee and Wang Dahai that they themselves killed the red bitch. When Wang Dahai sees the dead bitch, he orders a celebratory party with dog meat. Blo rgyam is disgusted by the thought of eating dog meat and leaves with the excuse that he must herd the horses. However, Dkon tho's father stays and eats some of the dog flesh since he has an "official" position on the Dog Killing Committee.

That night, Dkon tho's father becomes ill and dies. Rumors swirl that Dkon tho's father died from eating the flesh of A myes b+'a yan's watch dog.

Dkon tho was born a few months after his father's death.

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The story then moves back to the present where Dkon tho's mother lives with her brother, Blo rgyam, after she leaves her own home. Since the old villagers felt it was his responsibility to persuade Dkon tho to invite his mother back home, Blo rgyam goes to Dkon tho's home to talk to him. Dkon tho ignores Blo rgyam, who then thought it might be helpful if 'Jigs med talks to him, but 'Jigs med does not do so.

One night, when he returns home drunk, Dkon tho sees his cousin (uncle 'Jigs med's son) sleeping with his beautiful wife. Though he is infuriated, he thinks he cannot win in a fight with his cousin so he quietly takes his cousin's boots and throws them into the river.

The next morning, his cousin goes home barefoot. Realizing several days later that Dkon tho had thrown his boots into the river, he beats him, injuring his forehead. Dkon tho's mother is very angry with Dkon tho's cousin and his family. Blo rgyam now realizes that the source of Dkon tho's family disputes is not Dkon tho, but his beautiful wife, so he should talk to her rather than to Dkon tho. Blo rgyam first takes Dkon tho to the local clinic for treatment and then visits Dkon tho's uncle, 'Jigs med, and suggests that he apologize and give Dkon tho 500 *yuan*. 'Jigs med is enraged and refuses. Next, Blo rgyam asks the village leader, Ska the, to talk to 'Jigs med, but the village leader also shirks this responsibility.

Blo rgyam then summons all the community elders for a discussion. They conclude that Blo rgyam should take responsibility for persuading Dkon tho's wife to leave the community. Elders then persuade 'Jigs med to cover his nephew's medical costs. 'Jigs med provides 300 *yuan*, but Dkon tho is upset with such a small sum and tells the elders to ignore this matter. He adds that he will sue 'Jigs med's son and is confident that he will have the support of the legal system, because he and his wife have a marriage license.

Village elders plead with Dkon tho to not pursue the matter in court and give him another 300 *yuan* that 'Jigs med has provided. Dkon tho reluctantly agrees with the elders, but his mother is still angry with 'Jigs med's family. The elders then consult a local incarnation *bla ma* to divine what should be done to solve Dkon tho's family problem.

The incarnation *bla ma* tells the elders they should do nothing because the matter will solve itself.

Although the reader is not told how, a few days later, Dkon tho's family differences are reconciled and the mother returns to her home. Furthermore, the problems between Dkon tho's and 'Jigs med's families are also solved. But then another issue arises: Dkon tho's family becomes upset with Blo rgyam and does not talk to him. Dkon tho's mother is angry with her brother. She believes her husband (the second leader of the dog killing committee) died, because of her brother's red bitch. Dkon tho now says that his family has only enemies in the village so they plan to move to a neighboring community.

Dkon tho's declaration that his family has only enemies in the village reminds the elders of the red bitch's death so they again visit the incarnation *bla ma*, who says, "There is no reason to stop Dkon tho's family from leaving. Let them do whatever they want. This is Samsara."

The story concludes with the elders accepting this and Dkon tho's family leaving for another community.

The author vividly describes real events and elements of life he experienced. Born in the year the Cultural Revolution began, Stag 'bum rgyal's memories of life, relationships, mentalities, beliefs, and the policies implemented during the Cultural Revolution are well reflected. The complex dispute in Dkon tho's family is an example of how issues

in communities emerged and were worked out during the Cultural Revolution.

Rdo sbis klu 'bum rgyal (2017) notes that a distinctive feature of Stag 'bum rgyal's short stories is dogs, which he maintains, symbolize actual historical life. At times, dogs display human characteristics and at times, people display dog-like characteristics. For example, the red bitch is grateful and loyally returns to Blo rgyam's sheepfold to protect the sheep from wolves and later, to even kill a wolf. This is despite the fact that she was taken back to the mountains from whence she came and ordered to never return to Blo rgyam's home. Finally, when Blo rgyam searches for a red bitch to substitute for his family's red bitch, she returns to die near the family yard as a final, ultimate sacrifice for her master. Producing the bitch's dead body means Blo rgyam avoids detention and condemnation.

Terms involving dogs are used to curse those who commit very bad deeds, e.g., *khyi* 'dog', *khyi skyag* 'dog shit', *khyi phrug* 'son of a bitch', *khyi mo* 'bitch', *khyi rgan* 'old dog', and *h+ 'a pa* 'dog'. Dkon tho amply demonstrates his "dog" character by driving his mother out of his home instead of caring for her. Dkon tho clearly deserves the village elder's negative label of "dog" when the elder scolds, "*Dkon tho, khyod mi ma red, khyod khyi red* You are not human, you are a dog."

Another feature of this short story is its employment of the idea of reincarnation. Dkon tho claims to be an incarnation of the red bitch killed years earlier, the flesh of which his father ate and then died from. Dkon tho was born after the red bitch was killed.

Aspects of Tibetan herding life are also strikingly portrayed, e.g., quarrels between family members that local elders attempt to mediate. For instance, village elders want Dkon tho's wife banished from the community on the grounds that she is the source of serious problems, and appoint Blo rgyam to persuade Dkon tho's wife to leave. They are unsuccessful because Dkon tho's wife disagrees and states that she had nothing to do with her mother-in-law's departure from the home.

Traditional mediation is still practiced in certain communities, but with ambiguous results. For example, I am personally familiar with a situation in which a wealthy Tibetan killed a man in Brag dkar (Xinghai) County in 2016. A local incarnation bla ma then convinced

the deceased's family to accept compensation rather than pursue formal legal channels. Later, the man killed four more people and compensated each of those families, thus avoiding formal legal penalties.

This novel reflects aspects of traditional life in Amdo Tibetan herding communities both during the Cultural Revolution and in contemporary times. The author's vivid description of relationships, mentalities, beliefs, and policies during the Cultural Revolution and traditional mediation deserve reading by those keen to learn more about this culture in general, the Cultural Revolution as described by Tibetans living in China, and contemporary Tibetan herding communities.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'jigs med འཇིགས་མེད།
 a myes b+'a yan ཨ་མྱེས་བུ་ཡན།
 Amdo ཨ་མདོ།
 bla ma བླ་མ།
 blo rgyam བློ་རྒྱམ།
 brag dkar བྲག་དཀར།
 dkon tho དཀོན་ཐོ།
 h+'a pa ལྷ་པ།
 h+'a pa gsos pa'i zin bris ལྷ་པ་གསོས་པའི་ཟིན་བྲིས།
 khyi ཁྱི།
 khyi dang bdag po/ da dung gnyen tshan dag ཁྱི་དང་བདག་པོ། ད་དུང་གཉིན་ཚན་
 དག
 khyi mo ཁྱི་མོ།
 khyi phrug ཁྱི་ཕུག།
 khyi rgan ཁྱི་རྒན།
 khyi skyag ཁྱི་སྐྱག།
 khyod mi ma red/ khyod khyi red ཁྱོད་མི་མ་རེད། ཁྱོད་ཁྱི་རེད།
 mang ra མང་ར།
 mi rabs gsum gyi rmi lam མི་རབས་གསུམ་གྱི་མི་ལམ།
 mi rigs dpe skrun khang མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐུན་ཁང་།
 mi tshe'i glu dbyangs མི་ཚེའི་གླུ་དབྱངས།
 Minzu Wenxue 民族文学
 mtsho lho མཚོ་ལྷོ།
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྔོན།
 Orgyan Nyima འོ་རྒྱན་ཉི་མ།
 Qinghai hu 青海湖
 Rdo sbis klu 'bum rgyal རོ་སྤིས་ལུ་འབུམ་རྒྱལ།
 rgud རུད།
 rnam shes རྩམ་ཞེས།
 sbrang char བླང་ཅར།
 sgo khyi སྒོ་ཁྱི།
 ska the སྐ་ཐེ།
 stag 'bum rgyal སྐག་འབུམ་རྒྱལ།
 stag 'bum rgyal gyi sgrung gtam du 'khod pa'i khyi'i rtog brnyan gleng
 ba སྐག་འབུམ་རྒྱལ་གྱི་སྐྱུང་གཏམ་དུ་འཁོད་པའི་ཁྱིའི་རྟོག་བརྟན་གླེང་བ།
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Wang Dahai 王大海

Xinghai 兴海

Xizang Wenxue 西藏文学

Yuan 元

Zhao 赵

zi ling ཟི་ལིང་།